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What They Meant: On Helena Rosenblatt's "The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century"

By Christine Dunn Henderson

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As the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed, Francis Fukuyama famously speculated that we had reached "the end of history" and that with the demise of communism, liberal ideas and institutions would become universal. The years following 1989 have shown all too clearly that this optimism was misplaced, with scholars like Samuel Huntington weighing in on counterforces to liberalism, such as nationalism and religious fundamentalism. In recent years, with Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and the rise of far-right groups and figures such as Italy's Northern League and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro suggesting further cracks in liberalism's supposed hegemony, we have seen a spate of books exploring liberalism and its likely future. Some, like Patrick Deneen's Why Liberalism Failed, attribute contemporary political, social, and economic discontent to liberalism's secular and flawed ideology. Others, like Mark Lilla's The Once and Future Liberal, suggest liberalism can be saved and exhort liberals to reject divisive identity politics in favor of valued shared by all citizens. Although different in tone, perspective, and prescription, all of these recent works reflect anxiety about liberalism and what can be expected from it.

Helena Rosenblatt's The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century is the most recent entry into these debates about the meaning and future of liberalism. Rather than attacking or defending liberalism, however, Rosenblatt offers what she calls a "word history" of liberalism, believing that the best way to understand liberalism is to see "how liberals defined themselves and what they meant when they spoke about liberalism."

Comparatively compact and elegantly written, the book is divided into eight chapters, beginning with a sweeping discussion of the "pre-history" of liberalism that runs from Cicero to the eve of the French Revolution, and ending with a chapter in which Rosenblatt seeks to show how the language of liberalism became, by the beginning of the 20th century, both a central part of the American creed and transformed so that it was closely associated with individual rights. Between these bookends are six central chapters devoted to the evolution of liberal ideas in 18th- and 19th-century France, and, to a lesser extent, Germany. In the book's core, Rosenblatt focuses on a series of revolutionary moments, beginning with 1789 and the coining of the term "liberalism," then moving to liberalism's engagement with conservativism and socialism in the period leading up to the Revolutions of 1848. Next, Rosenblatt shows us how liberals turned — first intellectually and then politically — to projects of moral education and development in the period following the failed 1848 Revolutions. Finally, she casts light upon the late 19th century, when liberalism divided into two strands, one more friendly to socialism and one advocating a more limited role for the state.

The Lost History of Liberalism offers fascinating discussions of liberalism's engagement with religion and the Catholic Church, with colonialism, with the rise of state-sponsored education, with movements leading to the emancipation of slaves and of women, and with laissez-faire economics. Rosenblatt also does not shy away from liberalism's less proud moments, such as its flirtations with "race science" and with eugenics at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th. All of these discussions are welcome additions that help contemporary readers understand liberalism's rich texture and history.

That France and Germany lie at the heart of the book is not surprising, for Rosenblatt is a professor of history who specializes in 18th- and 19th-century Europe. Indeed, the middle chapters on liberalism in France and Germany are the book's strongest, and Rosenblatt uses her expertise of the period to paint an engaging history of the turmoil and political vicissitudes following the French Revolution of 1789. By drawing contemporary

attention to neglected figures such as Benjamin Constant, Germaine de Staël, and François Guizot, she creates a welcome supplement to the "standard" Anglo-centric histories of rights-based liberalism. Via the example of Constant, whose ideological commitments translated into political activity (albeit with somewhat disastrous results) and who authored major works on politics, economics, and religion, Rosenblatt allows the range of liberalism's concerns to be clearly seen. An emblematic liberal figure, Constant bears witness to the fact that to be liberal in the modern era did not mean to neglect the concerns of the soul. It is, however, important to remember that one of Constant's consistent messages is laissez-faire: the limitation of state interference in private activities, in order to open space for individual liberty — whether that liberty be exercised in the marketplace or in the temple.

Rosenblatt's attention to this French and German tradition is part of a project not merely to show how liberalism and related words have been used, but also to demonstrate that the English-language writers with whom liberalism is often associated are not the key figures in liberalism's intellectual development. Her reasons for wishing to displace thinkers traditionally linked with liberalism such as John Locke or Adam Smith seem to be because she associates them with an ideology that unduly prioritizes individuals' rights and simple self-interest over the interests of the community. Rosenblatt seeks to downplay this strand of liberalism, asserting instead that "[a]t heart, most liberals were moralists. Their liberalism had nothing to do with the atomistic individualism we hear of today […] They always rejected the idea that a viable community could be constructed on the basis of self-interestedness alone." These misgivings about self-interest and the suggestion that self-interest is always at odds with the common good seems also to lie behind the book's relatively scant attention to economic liberalism.

These concerns are also responsible for the book's neglect of the Anglo tradition. While drawing attention to key continental liberals is a welcome addition to genealogies of liberalism that focus primarily upon texts such as Magna Carta Libertatum or upon figures such as John Locke, to reject their importance to the liberal tradition (Locke appears but briefly and is among those brushed off as being "deeply immersed in the debates of their times") seems misleading. Similarly, to claim that "'an Anglo-American tradition' based so centrally on individual rights" is a 20th-century construction seems disingenuous. Rather than jettisoning the English tradition, Rosenblatt might have given an account of how early documents such as Magna Carta Libertatum were framed around the idea of protecting the rights of Englishmen, but their goal was to limit the power of the crown over individuals, and, as interpreted in the 17th century by thinkers such as John Selden, Edward Coke, and others, they came to be seen assertions of individual liberties against royal power.

Rosenblatt's worries that the early Anglophone liberals were overly concerned with economic self-interest also seem to explain her neglect of Adam Smith, who figures only passingly in the book. This is a pity because, in many ways, Smith fits nicely with Rosenblatt's understanding of liberalism. Far from being a simple advocate of narrow self-interest or selfishness, Smith's The Wealth of Nations shows how economic self-interest serves the interest of all. He was, moreover, concerned that the "stultifying" effects of assembly line production on the modern labor; these moralistic worries led him to favor state-sponsored educational programs. Finally, while The Wealth of Nations is Smith's most remembered title, he was also well known in his own time for The Theory of Moral Sentiments, which emphasizes the role of sympathy in drawing humans together and in causing individuals to be concerned with the feelings and well-being of their fellow creatures. Indeed, attention to Smith would have strengthened all of Rosenblatt's arguments about liberalism's essence. More attention to Friedrich Hayek, a 20th-century Austrian liberal and libertarian icon who is presumably neglected because of his free market stance, would have been similarly helpful, for Hayek also rejected the idea that individualism meant atomization and isolation as "the silliest of common misunderstandings."

Despite these shortcomings — and any history is apt to overlook figures or to do a certain amount of cherry-picking — Rosenblatt does contemporary audiences a great service by illuminating the neglected tradition of continental European liberalism and showing how those liberals responded to the political, social, and economic challenges of their day. She does this admirably, revealing also early liberalism's rich texture. As we search for ways to respond to the challenges of the contemporary world, The Lost History of Liberalism offers us a valuable resource.